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ABSTRACT

The Schools Commission's Disadvantaged Country Areas Program, an important strategy in promoting social and educational equity for rural children in Australia, is the focus of this paper. After a brief consideration of the historical background of the establishment of the Disadvantaged Country Areas Program, the objectives and operation of the Program are discussed. Aspects of Program operation covered include selection of areas, funding, committee structure and functions, and processes established for the use of resources provided. Strategies for improving education for rural children are examined next. Projects described are concerned with transport and mobility, curriculum development, community enrichment, technology, school-work transition, upgrading facilities, and effective use of resources. Finally, some of the constraints and tensions governing progress in the Program are discussed in relation to possible directions for the future. Problems considered include school based versus shared area programs, school based versus community based programs, a "rural" curriculum versus a core curriculum, system support versus independent operation, pilot projects versus ongoing program, local projects versus research and development, and consultants and coordinators versus local development. (CM)

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THE DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS PROGRAM: A PROGRAM DESIGNED TO INCREASE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY FOR RURAL CHILDREN

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THE DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS PROGRAM: A PROGRAM DESIGNED TO INCREASE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY FOR RURAL CHILDREN*

The purpose of this paper is to describe the Schools Commission's disadvantaged country areas program as an important strategy in promoting social and educational equity for rural children in Australia. After a brief consideration of the historical background to the establishment of the disadvantaged country areas program, the objectives and operation of the program will be discussed. Strategies for improving education for rural children will be described. Finally some of the constraints and tensions governing progress in the program will be discussed in relation to possible directions for the future.

THE SCHOOLS COMMISSION

Establishment and functions

The Schools Commission was established in 1973 along the lines recommended by the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission which was set up by the Commonwealth Government to examine the needs of government and non-government primary and secondary schools throughout Australia.[1] The functions outlined in the *Schools Commission Act 1973* include consideration of the need to improve the quality of existing school provision and the promotion of equal educational opportunities. In implementing these goals, the Commission is required to take into account, among other things, the needs of disadvantaged schools and of those students in all schools who are disadvantaged in their pursuit of educational success for reasons connected with their social, economic, ethnic, geographic, cultural or lingual background.

Program structure

The Commission established seven programs to administer the funds which were recommended to the Government as expenditure necessary for Australian schools to reach acceptable standards. The programs reflect the priorities the Commission considers should be given to the needs of schools and their students for buildings, equipment and staff. One of the five specific purpose programs is the Disadvantaged Schools Program, which is directed at improving the quality of education for disadvantaged children. The Program has two elements: disadvantaged schools and disadvantaged country areas.[2] The disadvantaged schools element is described in a paper presented to the 1978 Annual Conference of the Australia College of Education.[3] Over three hundred rural schools (22 per cent) participate in this section of the Program. The disadvantaged country areas element is the focus of this second paper on the Program. Disadvantaged children and groups with special needs in rural areas are also catered for through other Commission programs: for example, handicapped children and children in residential institutions through the Special Education Program, ethnic children through the Migrant and Multicultural Education Program, and groups such as girls, Aborigines and early school leavers through the Special Projects Program. In addition, the Commission's general purpose programs, the General Recurrent Grants Program and the Capital Grants Program, provide funding for general educational expenditure for all children, including the rural disadvantaged.

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* The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author alone.

Values

The values espoused by the Commission in all of its Reports have particular relevance to the disadvantaged country areas program.[4] In emphasising equality of educational opportunity and outcomes, the Commission maintains that ideally life chances, which are strongly associated with the special competencies which schooling is designed to build, should be independent of geographic, social and cultural background. All young people should leave school able to make sense of their world and act confidently in it. The Commission believes that the quality of schools and their educational programs will be improved by increasing parental and community participation, and devolving decision-making and responsibility towards the school level. Schools should be open to a range of possibilities and functions beyond existing arrangements. If school programs are to be effective, they must adapt to the social, cultural and ethnic differences of children within the school and to the geographic location of the community served by the school.

THE DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS PROGRAM

Historical background

Australia has a long history of expensive provision of education to country areas. State education departments have an impressive record of achievements in country education as they have attempted to reduce as far as possible any educational disadvantage derived from living away from urban areas. Nevertheless, regardless of the positive things being done, generous financial expenditure and the favourable attitude towards solving rural problems, serious misgivings exist about standards in rural education. In 1976, reports of the Commonwealth Government's Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts and the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty in Australia indicated that rural children participated less in schooling and in post-school training than those in urban areas and had low levels of aspirations, expectations and achievement.[5] A recent study of teaching, learning and transition to work in isolated schools showed that country students were seriously disadvantaged in reading achievement, self esteem, the teaching and curriculum they were experiencing and in their transition from school to work.[6]

The Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission recognised the educational disadvantages faced by country children. In *Schools in Australia* the Committee drew attention to the serious challenges faced in isolated rural areas where social and cultural pursuits rarely reinforce school experiences and in regions where itinerant and unskilled workers gather seasonally. The Committee suggested that the provision of educational facilities for isolated students be a matter for early consideration by the Schools Commission.[7]

In a major chapter of its 1975 Report the Commission reviewed the funding requirements for country education.[8] It recommended allocations within the General Recurrent Grants Program for activities designed to improve country education, and within the Capital Grants Program to upgrade residential facilities for students and improve teacher housing in country areas. Owing to the unstable economic climate these recommendations were not accepted by the Government of the day, however, they became the basis for the funds which were specifically allocated for country education in 1977. In its 1976 Report the Commission recommended the inclusion of a disadvantaged country areas element within the Disadvantaged Schools

Program in recognition of the different complex of variables associated with educational disadvantage in country schools.[9] A total of $4.1 million was allocated to allow pilot action in a limited number of the most affected areas.

A major ground for the provision of extra resources to country children is the tradition of low retention rates in country schools. Although 1980 statistics are not available, census statistics and statistics from selected regions in Tasmania, detailed in Tables 1 and 2, illustrate contrasts in retention rates in urban and rural areas. In a society where levels of education are rising and formal education increasingly determines life chances, the consequences for children failing to reach certain minimal levels of competence become even more serious than they have been in the past. Other problems, such as limited cultural and social influences, a paucity of resources, parochial perspectives, limited peer, parental and teacher expectations, poverty, lack of employment opportunities and the general economic stagnation associated with depressed rural conditions, all make the task of schooling more difficult in country areas. It is a matter of social justice that rural children should receive the maximum assistance from educational programs and that country schools should be given support to adapt their structure, curricula and educational practice to extending the opportunities and widening the horizons of the children they serve.

TABLE 1[10]

STUDENTS ATTENDING LEVEL 10 EXPRESSED AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL STUDENTS IN THE SAME TYPE OF SCHOOLS AND GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION, AUSTRALIA, 1971

eographical Location	Government			Catholic non-government			Other non-government			All schools		
	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
Major urban	4.7	3.9	4.3	5.9	4.9	5.4	17.9	16.0	17.0	5.6	4.7	5.2
Other urban	3.8	3.5	3.6	4.0	3.4	3.7	16.3	15.3	15.8	4.1	3.7	3.9
Rural	2.8	3.0	2.9	2.8	3.2	3.0	10.4	11.1	10.7	3.0	3.2	3.1
All locations	4.2	3.6	3.9	5.1	4.4	4.8	17.2	15.6	16.4	4.9	4.3	4.6

Source: *From tabulations provided to the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census 1971.* (*Fitzgerald. R.*, Poverty and Education in Australia: *Fifth main report of the Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty. Canberra, AGPS, 1976, p. 21).*

TABLE 2 [11]

YEAR 10 RETENTION RATES, 1973 TO 1976, AND YEAR 11 RETENTION RATES, 1974 TO 1977, IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS BY SELECTED SCHOOL REGIONS, TASMANIA (a)

School region	Percentage of Year 7 entrants remaining to Year 10 in				Percentage of Year 7 entrants remaining to Year 11 in			
	1973	1974	1975	1976	1974	1975	1976	1977
Urban regions								
Eastern Shore (Hobart)	81	81	86	87	35	35	35	34
West Tamar (Launceston)	87	84	95	95	35	40	32	28
Rural regions								
Huon Valley	69	62	68	77	11	12	11	14
Derwent Valley	66	77	76	78	18	11	14	12
Tasmania	74	74	77	79	28	29	30	28

(a) These retention rates do not take account of the effects of student transfers between urban and rural regions or government and non-government schools, grade repetition or migration.

Source: Education Department of Tasmania

Objectives

The disadvantaged country areas program aims to promote more equal educational opportunity through positive discrimination in resource allocation to schools serving Australia's most underprivileged rural areas. The additional resources are given to investigate new patterns of services designed to improve the quality of educational provision for all students in declared disadvantaged country areas, including correspondence students and those in government and non-government, primary and secondary schools at reasonable cost. Rural communities are encouraged to work with teachers to develop initiatives which involve sharing resources and facilities, and programs which will broaden and suit the experiences, interests and aptitudes of country students. By engaging parents and community people as partners with teachers in the learning process it is believed that schooling will become more effective and community life will be enriched.

Selection of areas

The Commission recognised that in view of the great variety of geographic situations in Australia the selection of the areas in each State should be left to those most aware of the various geographic, social and economic factors operating in the communities most affected by rural disadvantage. It was suggested that areas selected should be those where schools were so placed as to be capable of communicating and interacting with one another for the purpose of devising and implementing shared projects. Factors listed by the Commission as important indicators of disadvantage were school characteristics, such as retention rates, teacher turnover and limits on curriculum choice, and the nature of the area and its community, such as general socio-economic factors, ethnic composition, social isolation, employment opportunities and itineracy.

In 1977 fifteen areas were declared disadvantaged by the Commonwealth Minister for Education on the advice of the States following consultation between government and non-government authorities. By 1980 the number of areas had grown to twenty-three, with over 530 schools and 70,000 students participating in the program (Figure 1). 86 per cent of the students are in government schools, and 69 per cent are in primary schools. In Western Australia and South Australia the Correspondence Schools and Schools of the Air are declared as disadvantaged country areas, so all isolated students in these States participate in special projects. In the other States correspondence students living in the declared areas are included in the area projects. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of enrolments by State and system in 1979.

Funding

Since 1977 $18.6 million have been allocated for the program, distributed among the States on the basis of the numbers of students receiving isolated students allowances and the numbers of students living in centres of population of less than 5,000. Table 3 details the financial allocation to each State in 1980. The program has been maintained at real financial levels since it began in 1977 with an increase of $400,000 in 1979. The cost of this recurrent provision amounts to approximately $70 per student in declared disadvantaged country areas representing 0.13 per cent of total Australian educational expenditure on schools. The allocation to the program represents 0.76 per cent of the overall Commonwealth Government expenditure on schools. In terms of national average per student expenditure, the program provides approximately 5.27 per cent additional resources per student in schools in disadvantaged country areas.

TABLE 3

DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS PROGRAM:
FINANCIAL ALLOCATIONS FOR 1980

State	Amount $
New South Wales	1,472,000
Victoria	835,500
Queensland	1,212,000
South Australia	397,000
Western Australia	843,000
Tasmania	287,000
Northern Territory	112,000
TOTAL	$5,158,500

FIGURE 1

DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS
AUSTRALIA 1980

Not shown are the areas involving the isolated children of the South and Western Australian Correspondence Schools and the Port Augusta School of the Air (S.A.)

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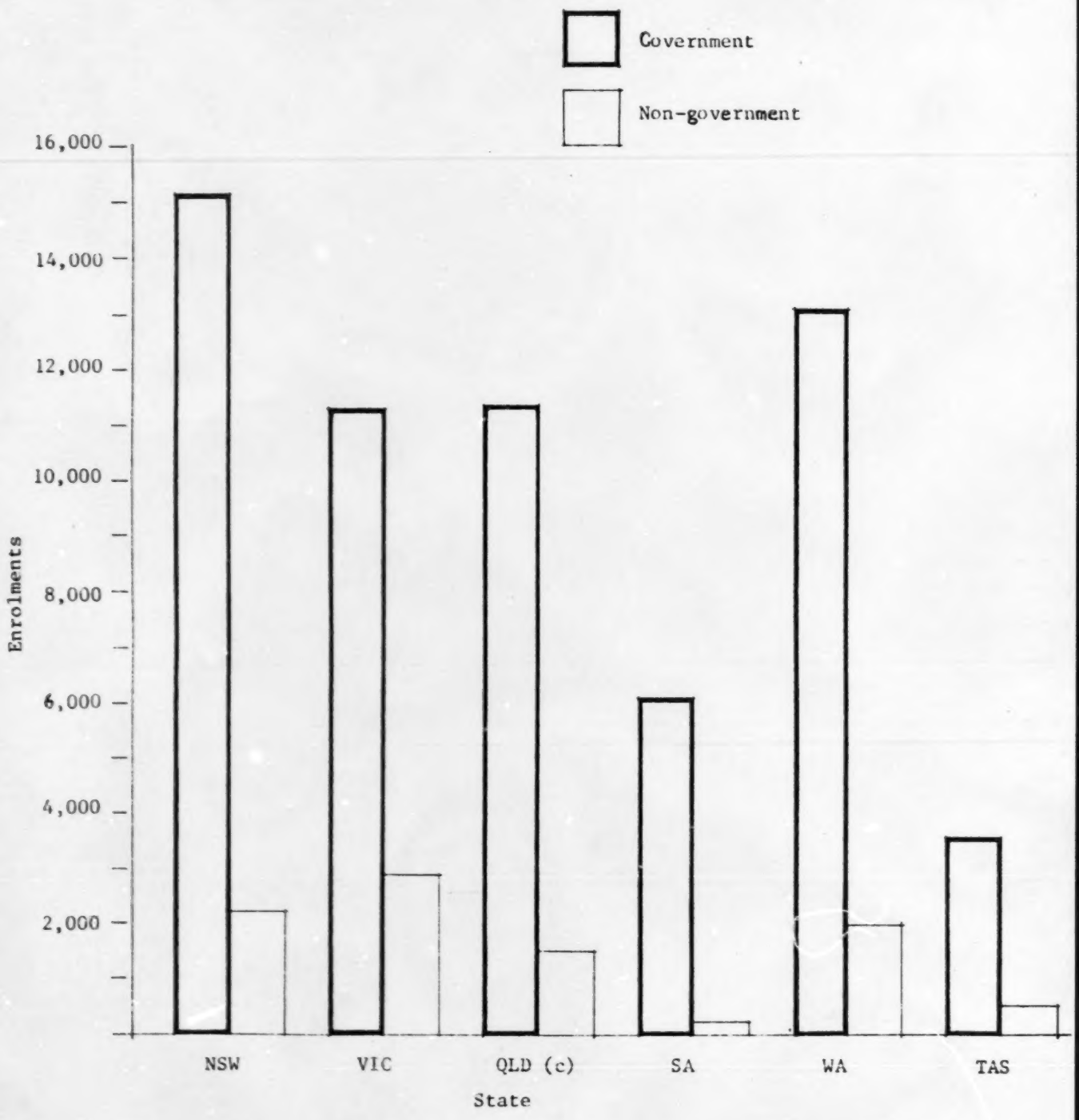
FIGURE 2

ENROLMENTS (a) IN SCHOOLS IN DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS, BY STATE (b) AND SYSTEM, 1979



(a) There are no maximum enrolments set by the Commonwealth. Each State decides the number and size of areas to be declared.

(b) The Northern Territory has been included in the program in 1980 but to date no area has been declared.

(c) In 1980 an additional area has been declared in Queensland.

Committee structure and functions

Decision-making in the program is shared by systems authorities, State and area committees, and local working parties (Figure 3). At national level, coordinators of the program in each State meet annually with a commissioner and the program director to exchange information and discuss policy issues.

State level committees range in size from three to nineteen persons representative of government and Catholic education systems, non-systemic schools, academics, teacher and parent associations and ethnic communities. Their functions include liaising with the State Minister for Education, government and non-government education authorities, the Schools Commission and other interested agencies; promoting an understanding of the program through enunciating program principles and aims, and establishing general guidelines for operation; receiving submissions from area committees; reviewing current provisions for country education and assessing needs; and making recommendations on additional areas to be declared.

At area level representative committees are closely involved in the development of submissions, the implementation of funded projects, and monitoring and evaluating the progress of the program in the area. They assist in the identification of needs and resources, foster community involvement and provide a link between those working in schools and communities and the State committees.

Local action committees and working parties, consisting of teachers, parents, other community members and students, develop cluster projects for groups of schools in the areas. For some of these committees it is a requirement that 50 per cent of the membership should be lay people. The detailed structure and function of each State's committees is provided in the Commission's published reports on the program: *Learning to Share.*[12]

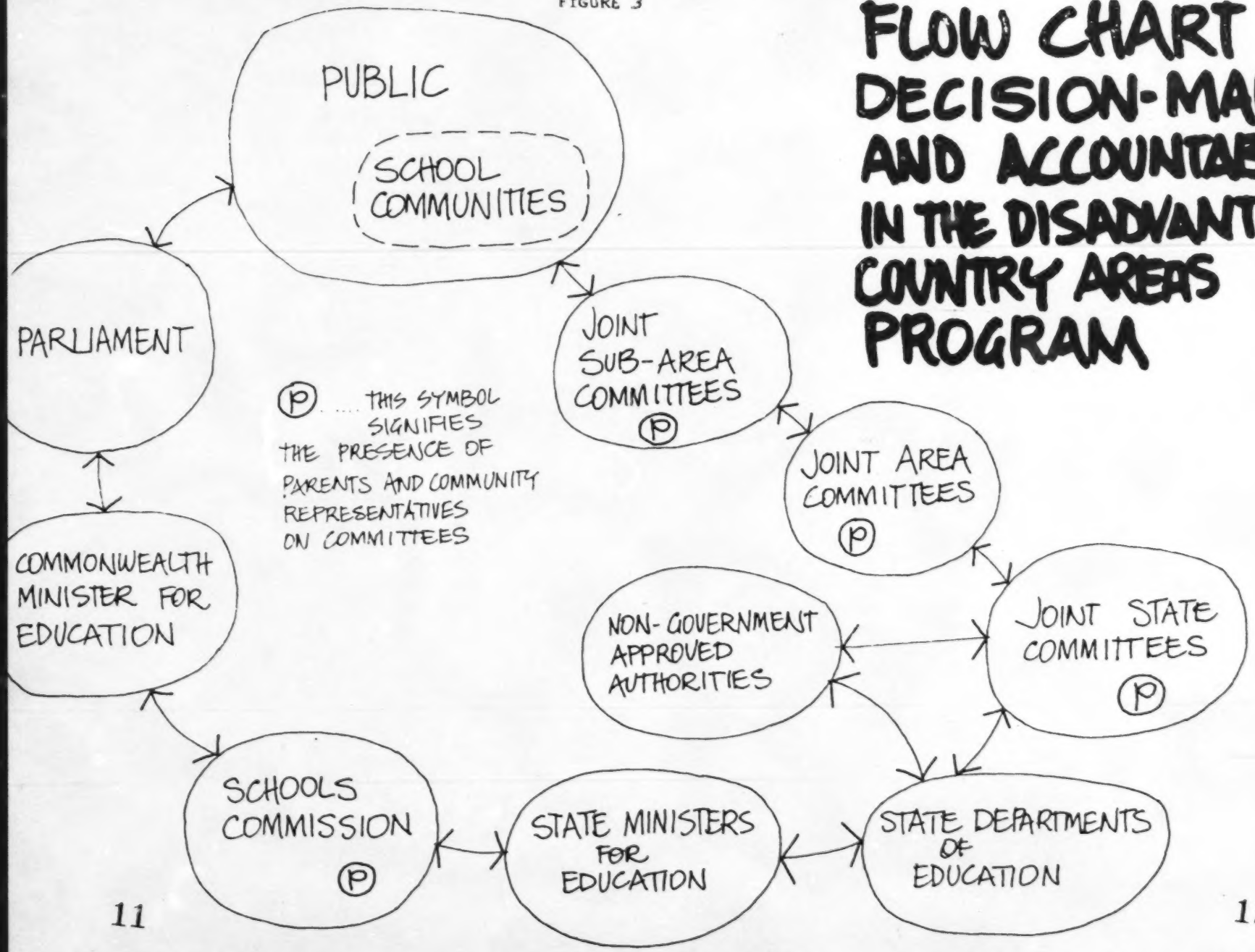
Processes of operation

The processes established to use the additional resources provided are a very important part of the disadvantaged country areas program. The program rests on the premise that there are no known universal recipes for improved educational approaches, motivation or outcomes as they are associated with social inequality. Area communities are required to analyse the existing school arrangements and the special needs and life experiences of their students, together with the particular resources and benefits available within the area. They develop proposals which they consider will improve educational practice in the schools and improve learning outcomes for the students. These proposals are put to the area committees which allocate funds to provide the resources in either human or material ways. Generally, decisions about projects are made locally rather than at central level. Part of the process which is expected of area communities is that they constantly evaluate the projects they have put into practice.

The joint nature of the program has engendered cooperation across primary and secondary divisions and sectarian boundaries and has led to the sharing of ideas, responsibility, personnel and resources. Cooperation has extended across State boundaries where areas meet, as in the case of Queensland and New South Wales. The concept of sharing across

FIGURE 3

FLOW CHART FOR DECISION-MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS PROGRAM



areas has built cooperative networks of people and organisations in country areas. The development of people through the cooperative decision-making processes of the program has built confidence and competence in rural communities.

SCOPE OF ACTIVITIES

Among the declared areas different factors operate to reduce the effectiveness of schooling and approaches have been varied according to the special needs and particular kinds of disadvantage in the different areas. But there are also many common problems such as isolation (both geographic and cultural), relatively low community standards of education, limited vocational opportunities and lack of resources, which have led to the initiation of similar approaches to project development.

Figure 4 illustrates the categories of projects implemented through the program in 1977 and 1978. The division into categories is somewhat arbitrary as many of them overlap. For example, most projects have an element of community involvement and it has been difficult to separate community involvement projects from the cultural enrichment and social development category. Over the two years for which statistics are available there has been a considerable increase in administrative costs and transport, attributable to the declaration of more areas which have required additional services. The initial capital and equipment expenditure on community and communication facilities in 1977 tapered off in 1978.

The following description of projects is intended to give the flavour of some of the key strategies adopted to improve educational services for country children.

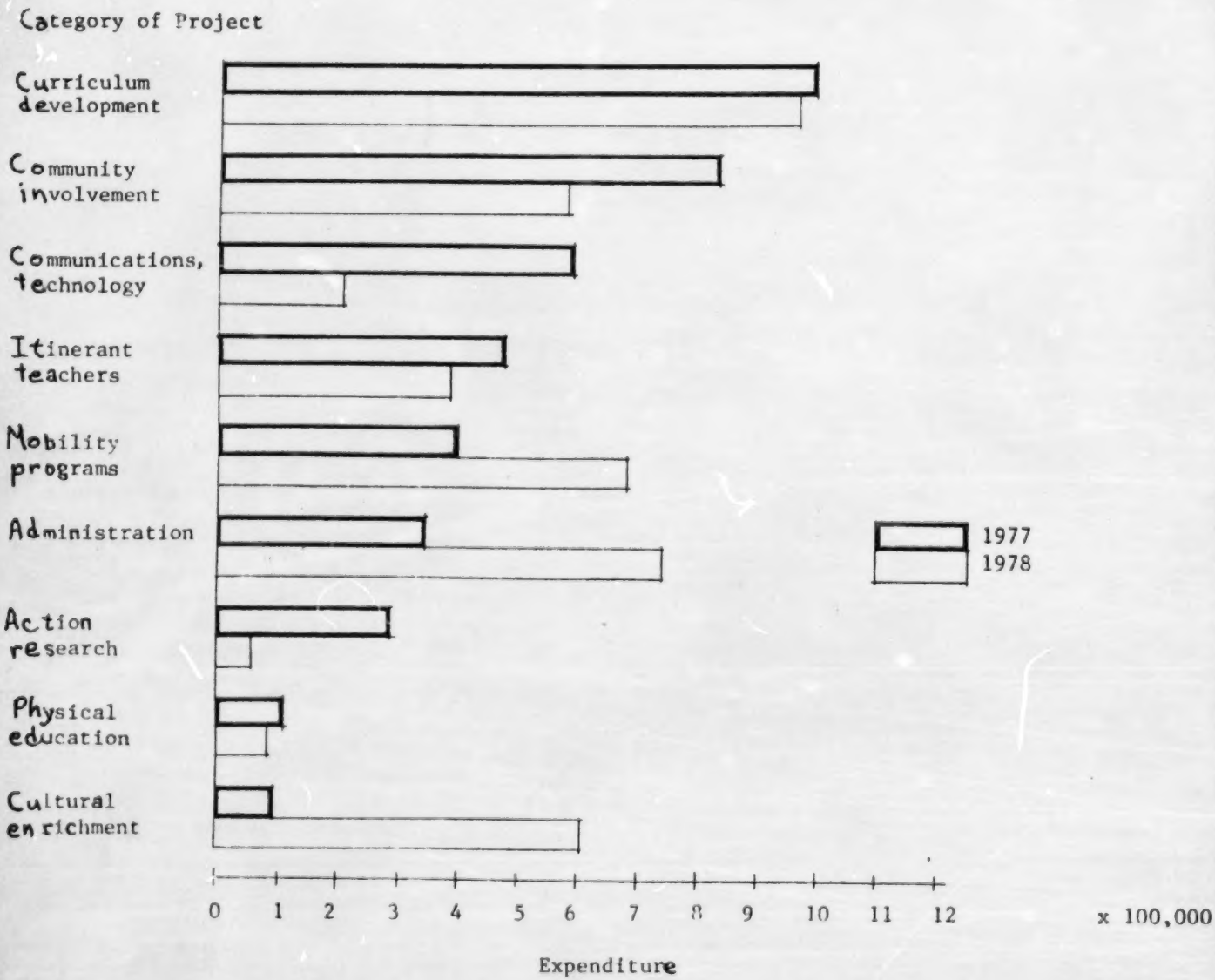
Transport and mobility

The problem of geographic isolation has stimulated projects involving student travel, the employment of itinerant teachers and specialists, and the use of mobile resources to bring a variety of equipment, materials and services, such as mobile libraries, curriculum buses, resource units, art craft vans and remedial caravans, into isolated areas. In Queensland mobile manual arts workshops, one for woodwork and one for metalwork, have met the demand for technical education in isolated areas and a mobile classroom provides a bridge between the primary correspondence school and the regular classroom. The mobile classroom visits a number of localities for at least one period each term, and where necessary, students board privately in the neighbourhood so they can attend each day. A pilot, who is also a musician, cooperates with local instructors in providing music education for over four hundred students in six centres. Town and regional bands have been formed to enliven the cultural experiences of these country communities.

Curriculum development

Some projects have been responses to urgent and specific needs of some individuals and small groups in the areas. The problems of isolated correspondence students and those periodically cut off from their schools by bad weather have been recognised by providing home-study kits in a variety of curriculum areas. Curriculum consultants have been appointed to work with local staff in producing relevant materials, such as environmental readers and local history resource books. Aboriginal culture kits produced in New South Wales include materials for both

DISADVANTAGED COUNTRY AREAS PROGRAM:
CATEGORIES OF PROJECTS FUNDED,
AUSTRALIA, 1977 AND 1978



teachers and students at primary and secondary levels with information about the traditions, culture and life-styles of Aboriginal people. In Victoria drama developmental programs use drama workshops to develop language and social skills; human relations courses involve lectures, workshops and seminars around issues affecting family life; and literacy and numeracy remediation courses are organised by parents and teachers during the school holidays.

Community enrichment

Some projects reflect the desire of rural communities to create a more positive climate for learning and overcome the limitations imposed either by isolation or rural depression. The general level of competence and confidence in the community itself is seen to influence directly the effectiveness of schooling. In the Western Wimmera Area in Victoria up to 1,000 people, including 700 school-leavers and adults, participate in a technical life skills program. Subjects ranging from welding and car maintenance to woodwork and crafts are taught in schools, garages, farm sheds and community halls. Both professional and non-professional instructors are involved. Community festivals are held in most areas to bring children and adults together, display art and craft, teach and learn new skills, enjoy sport and recreation, and celebrate community activities. In South Australia an itinerant teacher 'rides the rails' at Australian National Railways expense to deliver an expressive arts program to children in three isolated schools. During the day children participate in crafts, drama, art and music activities and at night adults share in the program. Photography and jazz ballet have been two of the activities brought to these communities for the first time.

Technology

A number of projects reflect an awareness of the impact which modern technology and communications could have on education in country areas. In some cases this awareness finds a modest expression, such as the installation of an additional telephone at a correspondence school enabling students to make reverse charge calls to their teachers, or the expanded use of audiovisual materials in the curriculum. In Queensland video receivers have been supplied to schools which are beyond normal transmission so that regular Australian Broadcasting Commission educational programs can be received. In addition, programs are being produced with local content of immediate interest and relevance to country children at a range of age levels. ROCTAPUS (Really Outstanding Colour Television About Practically Unlimited Subjects) is a fortnightly magazine television program provided to more than eighty schools and over 10,000 students in the ten to sixteen years age group in the areas. In New South Wales an Education Radio Station (2WEB) has been established. Its Telephone Broadcast Unit enables talk-back radio programs to involve school groups in exchanges with visiting and local experts. The radio station provides a practical training facility for students in many aspects of modern communication and media techniques. In Victoria audiovisual equipment has been installed on a school bus so that children travelling up to three hours each day can be shown a range of educational and recreational programs.

School-work transition

Although schools cannot make jobs they can attempt to improve the access of country students to the available jobs and help them to think about the nature of work in our society. A residential centre for country

students has been established in Sydney enabling Year 10 country students to visit the city for three to four weeks to enjoy a variety of work and leisure experiences. As well as participating in work experience with employers, the students tour museums and galleries, learn job interview techniques, receive careers advice and undertake voluntary work for community services. A pilot project conducted at a local milk factory in Victoria offers work experience in boilermaking, factory maintenance, engineering mechanics and office procedure. The success of this scheme has led to meetings of career teachers in the high schools in the area in order to coordinate existing work experience opportunities and develop new ones.

Upgrading facilities

In some areas existing facilities had run down because of population drift and economic depression, and in some cases facilities which are taken for granted by most Australians had never existed. In both New South Wales and Western Australia, community youth centres and education resource centres have been established which have had farreaching effects beyond the school in providing services to community groups and individuals. The centres have contributed to social development, cultural enrichment and recreational opportunities for all members of the community. In the King Valley/Ovens Valley area in Victoria a survey found that more than 65 per cent of children in the small schools in the area were unable to swim well enough to be considered safe in water or to be able to enjoy the recreational advantages of their own beautiful area, with its many rivers. Three learner pools have now been built and a swimming program is underway. School libraries in isolated areas have been expanded and curriculum development materials have been provided.

Effective use of resources

Projects undertaken in all areas over the past three years reflect an awareness that more effective use can be made of educational resources which have often been neglected in traditional approaches to schooling. Local people with artistic, musical and technical talents have become the backbone of many programs as the hidden talents in the community have been discovered. The unexplored natural environment is the basis for the Barwon River system project in New South Wales, and for camping and field study programs in other areas. In many communities new and interesting ways of sharing resources which would have otherwise been too costly for any one group have been trialled. For example, in Tasmania a specialist project team of consultants is supplying a diagnostic service and assisting teachers to produce remedial programs in language and mathematics. The team, which includes a speech therapist, social worker and music teacher, spends a period of concentrated activity in a school before going on to another school in the area. The sharing of ideas and approaches has stimulated community involvement and led to the professional development of isolated teachers.

CONSTRAINTS AND TENSIONS

While the brief descriptions above have indicated the scope of the disadvantaged country areas program for increasing social and educational equality for rural children, a number of problems place constraints on the effectiveness of the program.

School based versus shared area programs

Some areas cover such vast geographic distances that area based programs are not feasible. For example, in the Far North Area of South Australia where six schools cater for people in the remote Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal communities, the closest schools are more than ninety kilometres away from each other and the group of schools spans some eight hundred kilometres. The Commonwealth guidelines provide for school based programs to be funded in such cases, but the economy gained from sharing resources is not possible and the range of action open to an individual school under the program is limited. Many services are impractical and are expensive on a single school basis. On the other hand, where the school is the unit of the program it is more likely that its internal processes, relationships and curriculum content will be seriously scrutinised. The area emphasis can draw the attention of teachers away from an examination of how successful the school is in formal teaching. It can encourage a proliferation of 'add on' projects which other people can implement. Another drawback of the area approach is the number of people involved in area committees which can become so large as to allow public participants to dominate in a way which does not promote the development of schools as communities of action. There is a danger that the committees may become a focus of sectional conflict whose first concern is not the education of students in schools. Nevertheless, where professionals and community people are brought together to consider what students should get out of school to enhance the quality of their lives, the understanding that schools alone cannot be held responsible for educative experiences and formal outcomes is spread. In my view a balance between sharing programs across areas and paying attention to the basics of individual school programs must be achieved for maximum benefits.

School based versus community based programs

Under legislation all Commission funding is for primary and secondary students. The primary intention of all activities must be to benefit students, and schools must own the equipment bought. In some States, there has been so much stress on the community involvement sought through the program that teachers claim some programs funded have been solely for the benefit of adults. In one State, in particular, the program has deliberately aimed to provide education for local development. Certainly in all States the experience of community participation and local control of educational programs has decreased the powerlessness of rural communities and contributed to an understanding of the processes involved in change. Many of the activities commenced in the schools have now been taken over by the communities, which have tapped into governmental agencies other than education for additional financial, material and personnel support to improve the quality of community life. Nevertheless, in my view, educators must be concerned primarily with improving the day-to-day experiences of schooling for children. Turning outwards towards the community must be evaluated largely in terms of what it does for school change and student development. Parent engagement in the educational programs provided for their children, has positive spin-offs in attitudes to learning. A balance is needed between the school's responsibility for and contribution to the individual fulfilment of students, community needs and development, and the needs of society as a whole.

A 'rural' curriculum versus a core curriculum

The program has highlighted the inadequacy of the curriculum in some rural schools in Australia. Factors such as the high turnover of staff, teacher inexperience, limited resources, poor physical and social environment, and isolation have been blamed for unsatisfactory curriculum adaptation and implementation. There is general agreement that rural schooling should pursue system-wide objectives to the extent necessary to provide rural children with a coherent, systematic K to Year 12 program with continuity of curriculum in the face of student and teacher mobility and opportunities to progress to vocational opportunities or further education. Nevertheless, the curriculum must reflect local circumstances and values, utilise local resources and be relevant to children's day-to-day activities. Local curriculum projects in all areas have assisted students to come to value their local community and helped the community both to understand and contribute to the schools programs and to see the school as a major community resource. In one area a pool of expertise in curriculum development is being developed. In some States committees have communicated to tertiary education institutions the importance of provision in pre-service courses for teachers to be trained to be aware of the local community and understand adult communication skills. Inservice activities with these aims have been organised within the areas.

System support versus independent operation

In most States attempts have been made to build the program into system structures. Personnel have been provided through systems personnel branches, and supplies and equipment have been bought within the usual departmental tender constraints. In some cases the intersystemic nature of the program has given strength to program committees to stand outside direct bureaucratic control and publicly to challenge bureaucratic constraints which would limit the ability of people to do what they decide should be done. In one State the chairperson is himself outside bureaucratic structures and has independent access to the Minister and the media which facilitates this. In another, staff have been employed through the Catholic Education Office allowing the program to support people who could not have been employed under normal government staff ceilings. At this stage it is too early to say whether building the program into the system makes it more kindly disposed to picking up the costs of successful programs. No State seems anxious to do this. Nevertheless, should funding cease, it is possible that programs which have become part of the system will continue to operate, whereas programs outside the system may lose all financial support. On the other hand, programs outside the system may be more successful in seeking support from sources other than education departments.

Pilot projects versus ongoing programs

At the commencement of the program it was recognised that the funds available were only sufficient for the testing of prototype patterns of providing educational services in the most disadvantaged of Australia's country areas. After three years, area committees feel that some of these pilot projects have established themselves as worthwhile, even essential, services. If those projects are not taken over by systems, with the present policy of maintenance of funding, no extra resources exist to try out new ways of meeting the needs of country students. In addressing this issue one State has decided to phase areas out of the program every five years and rotate its country areas through the program. The policy decision involves a year's planning grant, three years full funding and a year's grant to wind up programs. Although this development might be

satisfactory for a specialist resource team, it would be disastrous if the major project were a radio station, or television programs or itinerant teachers which depend on ongoing funding. Another State has suggested extending funding to all country areas. In considering this alternative a great deal depends on the relative weight given to resources and processes in estimating the effectiveness of the program, and on the importance placed on the areas involved being special as a source of the *elan* which sustains the program. If the program is seen as a general prototype for improving country education the further it is spread the better. If positive discrimination and the greater urgency of improvements in the most disadvantaged country areas are given prominence the desire will be to confine it. If there is to be no increase in Commonwealth funds and States are unable to fund ongoing projects it is difficult to see how any additional areas might be declared without phasing out areas presently included.

Local projects versus research and development

Most States have distributed as high a proportion of funds as possible to the areas, leaving little money for research and development projects. but, some have been carried out. New South Wales has commissioned tertiary institutions to conduct research into three areas: the educational needs of country children, motivation and achievement in country schools, and school leavers and their occupations. In Victoria a survey of educational needs of migrant students has been completed and an Initiatives Committee has recently been established at State level to encourage the development of new ideas. Queensland has piloted a significant scheme whereby teacher education students volunteer to spend their holidays on isolated homesteads supervising correspondence lessons and stimulating the language development of students. In Western Australia a study into teaching methods in one teacher schools has been funded. Tasmania has preceded the opening of each area by a well documented study of the educational needs of the area. In a few areas full consultation with teachers and community people originally produced projects which were unimaginative and reflected a desire for more of the same. In these cases the input of people with a broad understanding of the economic and social context and some expert knowledge, such as how to help teachers to cope with special needs in the classroom, improved the quality of programs implemented. In other cases, a particular emphasis expressed by program administrators for one kind of project, say curriculum development or mobility, constrained the possibility of a variety of programs in particular areas. In my view a balance is needed between research and action, between the input of professionals and local people. Certainly more needs to become known about opportunities for young people in the country areas of Australia if projects concerned with the problems of country children and country schools are to be soundly based.

Consultants and coordinators versus local development

One State decided early to employ full-time program administrators and consultants, and part-time coordinators in the areas. Emphasis was given to sponsoring intra-and inter-area visits by committee members and holding seminars and inservice activities for key people in the program to the extent that almost one-third of funds has been spent on administrative activities. This approach clearly limits the amount of funds available for area projects. By way of contrast, one State

committee, which has relied completely on the part-time consultancy service of busy administrators, held its first State seminar in 1980 and has lamented the lost opportunity to communicate more effectively the philosophy and guidelines of the program and to provide much needed support to people in the areas. Again a balance is needed but the key role of effective communication in successful program development indicates the importance of constant inservice work.

THE FUTURE

Despite rural to urban migration trends it is clear that thousands of Australian children will continue to be dependent upon rural schools and rural delivery systems for their education during the compulsory years of schooling. This paper has not discussed the problems of access to secondary level opportunities in country areas, the needs of special rural populations, such as Aborigines, itinerant workers and girls, nor the difficulty of attracting and retaining competent experienced teachers, which continue to be of concern. The reality of high per pupil expenditures in rural schools offering an adequate program has not changed. The cost of providing exactly the same programs, services and resources in rural schools as are commonly found in urban schools is prohibitively high. It is therefore essential that government policies and assistance are designed explicitly to maximise social and educational equity for rural children. The disadvantaged country areas program as described in this paper is one reform strategy with this specific purpose.

The program has given the stimulus for educators to examine some of the most fundamental ways in which we think about country education. In the past we have sought to reduce as far as possible educational disadvantage derived from living away from urban areas. This notion is based on the assumption that the urban model is best. Some area committees involved in the program have taken as their starting point the need to amplify the educational advantages of living in country areas. Instead of schools being seen as belonging to centralised systems, they have been considered as schools which belong to their communities - communities which have some responsibility for the quality of education going on in their schools. Local people have been trusted to make intelligent choices and to define their educational needs, working together with professionals and have produced promising results.

The program has been in operation for only three years so it is too early to demonstrate conclusively its long term effects. In some States the processes of the program have been slower to develop than in others. However, in all States the program has become an examplar of good resource allocation generally, demonstrating the potential impact of the area approach and the possibilities for sharing supplemented by marginal additional resources. The initiatives made possible in the 5.3 per cent of Australian schools participating in the program, which include those in the most isolated areas, have generated hope in those working in the schools and living in the communities surrounding them. Whole communities have been regenerated as people have identified local resources and acted together to improve education for their children. Strong support for the program exists from systems, national and State

parents and teachers associations, school communities and community organisations. It may be that through cooperation, sharing of resources, sharing of the decision-making process, and emphasis on the advantages and competencies that communities possess, results could be produced that last beyond an initial funding period.

Of course the future of education in disadvantaged country areas cannot be considered in isolation from the realities of rural life in general. A recent edition of Four Corners, which discussed the closure of the abattoirs at Forbes in New South Wales, has reminded us again of how vulnerable and fragile communities dependent on one industry really are if that industry collapses. Further, the movement towards social and educational equity for children in declared areas has not yet had an impact on children in depressed rural communities outside declared areas. Nevertheless, the spirit of cooperation amongst and across schools, school systems and communities engendered by the disadvantaged country areas program can be a model for other areas and might stimulate systems to use their own funds to spread some of the program processes to other country areas.

The program has certainly made schooling a more effective experience for country children in declared areas, if effectiveness is measured in terms of the objectives of improving the quality of educational provision, broadening children's experiences, providing new ways of sharing resources and facilities, and stimulating community involvement in schooling. In terms of improving learning outcomes there is promising evidence from Tasmania. The proportion of Huon Valley children at risk because of performance in basic skills has been substantially reduced since 1976. While the improved performance on standardised tests of reading and number cannot be directly attributed to the initiatives taken through the program there has been an improvement in comparison with the rest of the State that is significant.

The most successful projects across Australia are those in which rural people themselves have taken initiatives, indicating that much of the responsibility for moving ahead belongs to those working in rural education and those who live in rural communities. However they cannot do it alone. Knowledgeable professionals working together with rural educators and local people are needed over the longer term. The success of the program will be measured by how well it has supported these working partnerships and how effectively this leads to the access of all country children to full participation in society.

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